

After weeks of delay, BP deploys sensors to measure size of spill

Andre Damon
14 June 2010

BP deployed undersea sensors to measure the flow of oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico on Sunday, as official estimates of the spill size continued to grow.

Last week, a team of scientists estimated that the rate of the oil spill was between 30,000 and 50,000 barrels (1.2 million and 2.1 million gallons) per day. Scientists on the federal Flow Rate Technical Group (FRTG) have said that BP's move to cut the riser pipe from the well likely increased the rate of flow beyond this figure, perhaps by several multiples.

Until this weekend, BP and the government repeatedly stressed that they had no intention of installing equipment to measure the flow of oil, alleging that such attempts would interfere with efforts to cap the leak. On several occasions BP spokespeople said that it would be impossible to adequately measure the size of the leak.

These claims coincided with deliberate attempts to downplay the vast scale of the flow. In the weeks after the April 20 disaster, the corporation and the government claimed first that there was no spill, then that the rate was 1,000 barrels a day, then 5,000 barrels a day, before finally putting it at 12,000 to 19,000 on May 27. This figure was later revealed to be an absolute minimum range determined by the FRTG.

BP has been collecting about 15,000 barrels of oil per day from a containment cap that it has lowered onto the well. Once the oil is collected, it is pumped up to ships located above the well and taken ashore. This means that at least 15,000 to 35,000 barrels of oil continues to flow freely into the Gulf.

The government told BP to provide plans for increasing its on-site processing capacity to correspond with the government's latest estimate of the spill size.

Coast Guard Commandant Thad Allen, who is heading the spill response for the Obama

Administration, said BP currently has the capacity to process 28,000 barrels of oil per day at the well site. US Coast Guard Rear Admiral James Watson sent a letter on Friday to BP asking that it deploy additional ships to the site to increase its capacity to 40 or 50 thousand barrels of oil.

Even in the face of the new estimates, Obama administration officials are seeking to minimize the rate of flow to the extent possible. On Sunday, Allen put the flow rate at about 40,000 barrels a day, and claimed absurdly that the true rate will only be known "when we have it completely capped, control the flow, can actually measure" it.

At the same time, Allen defended BP, saying that earlier estimates "were never BP's figures. They were our figures. We have several different methods of trying to establish the flow rate, from taking overhead satellite imagery of the oil on the water to using very high resolution video to try to assess the volume of the flow and velocity at which it's rising."

What Allen did not mention is that earlier independent figures based on these methods—and in the face of attempts by BP to block access to imagery of the leak itself—conform to the current high estimates. Weeks before the government increased its initial estimate, independent experts analyzed a video of the spill to conclude that the well was leaking 70,000 barrels per day.

The *Alabama Press-Register* reported on a video released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) showing scientists discussing a rate of spill of 64,000 to 110,000 barrels per day.

The Obama administration is scrambling to respond to a growing political crisis and contain popular anger.

Obama will be traveling to the Gulf of Mexico Monday, after which he will deliver a public address at the White House on Tuesday evening. The following day he will meet with BP executives in the attempt to reach an accommodation with company.

Obama is calling for the creation of an escrow account to pay out claims from residents and workers. Leading Democrats suggested a figure of \$20 billion for this account—a tiny fraction of the damage caused by the spill. A study released by Earth Economics, a Seattle-based environmental group, estimates the economic value of the Gulf of Mexico environment at \$1.3 trillion, implying that the economic damages of the spill could in reality amount to hundreds of billions of dollars.

BP is seeking assurances that its liabilities will be limited. Obama spoke with UK Prime Minister David Cameron on Friday, reassuring him that he had no intention of “undermining” the stock market value of BP.

Meanwhile, evidence continues to mount regarding the government’s complicity in the oil rig explosion. The *Washington Post* reported Saturday that the emergency disconnect system on the rig, which workers tried and failed to activate during the explosion, was never inspected by any government agency.

During Congressional testimony, a Minerals Management Service official was asked if there was “any type of requirements or inspection methodology to ensure that the emergency disconnect system works,” to which he replied, “No.”

The Associated Press reported on Sunday that the government did not require plans for the drilling of relieve wells—currently the last hope to cut off the eruption, which will not be completed until August or September. These wells were not started until 12 days after the explosion.

The AP notes: “And the plan ultimately approved by the government offers virtually no details outlining the relief well effort or what dangers might lurk in the depths as the company drills 18,000 feet below the surface.... Experts say the relief effort could be exposed to the same risks that caused the original well to blow out in catastrophic fashion, while potentially creating a worse spill if engineers were to accidentally damage the existing well or tear a hole in the undersea oil reservoir.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact